



190 Views

Future Perfect

By **Imphal Free Press**
October 6, 2015 20:58

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How much is culture responsible for the progress made or the lack of it of any given society? Or more provocatively in our context, how much is culture responsible for the embrace or resistance to modernity and development? These are questions that keep returning because of their continued relevance. There are any number of books written on the subject, addressing and seeking the roots of so much disparity in development all over the world. The intriguing nature of the question has also assured many of these books to become best-sellers. Just to cite two examples in the possession of IFP are Jared M. Diamond's 'Guns, Germs and Steel' and Professor David S. Landes' 'Wealth and Poverty of Nations'. But another one 'The Central Liberal Truth' by foreign aid worker, Lawrence E Harrison, which says culture does make a world of difference in attitudes to modernity and development must also be in the list of important works on this subject. The thought if pursued, developed, and applied earnestly and consensually, can also pay dividends for the Manipur society. How much have our own varying cultures been a catalyst or inhibitor of modernity and development? Complaints about the lack of these qualities as consequences rather than causes of lack of development are not uncommon, but what has been uncommon is any sincere, soul-searching attempt to gauge the conditions that might have possibly contributed to things going wrong on the way. What has been the role of culture and tradition in our grappling with this issue of gravity? It would indeed be an interesting academic study to make an assessment of the correlation between development and the willingness of a community to accept change. We would for one vouch that the praxis, at least in this case is extremely strong.

Another study by American economists Raymond Fisman and Edward Miguel, to demonstrate the same praxis between cultural grounding and development is interesting from this vantage. The study takes into account records of illegal parking tickets earned by diplomatic vehicles from different countries in New York. The figures seem hardly a coincidence. The two economists found out that diplomats from countries that rank high on the Transparency International corruption index pile up huge numbers of unpaid tickets, whereas diplomats from countries that rank low on the index get barely any at all. For instance, between 1997 and 2002, they found out, the UN Mission of Kuwait picked up 246 parking violations per diplomat. Diplomats from Egypt, Chad, Sudan, Mozambique, Pakistan, Ethiopia and Syria also committed huge numbers of violations. By contrast, not a single parking violation by a Swedish diplomat was recorded. Nor were there any by diplomats from Denmark, Japan, Israel, Norway or Canada. The reason for this as per their conclusion is, human beings are not merely products of economics, but are also shaped by cultural and moral norms. 'If you are Swedish and you have a chance to pull up in front of a fire hydrant, you still don't do it. You are Swedish. That's who you are.' In this light, another politician thinker of the mid 20th Century, Walter Lippmann, who once said in a speech: 'All cultures have value because they provide coherence, but some foster development while others retard it. Some cultures check corruption, while others permit it. Some cultures focus on the future, while others focus on the past. The question that is at the centre of politics today: Can we self-consciously change cultures so they encourage development and modernization?'

The question is profoundly relevant to our situation. How receptive has our own cultures been to a vision of a modernised future. Can we say the same thing that has been said of the Swedish diplomats who would not park in front of a fire hydrant even in the dead of the night when no one is watching, in referring to our own elite? Do we see signs of any moral and social obligations that would stop someone from littering the streets with their kitchen garbage? Do our consciences come to play in checking personal urges for unfair and corrupt practices? Are there any unwritten norms that make people guilty at breaking one-way traffic norms? It is indeed a telling revelation that most often it is siren blaring, flag waving VIP vehicles that violate these norms. There have also been tremendous debates as well as idle talks about the infamous, lethargic work culture in the official establishment. Has there ever been an inherent, cultural checking mechanism that informs the place that such lethargy amounts to dishonesty to profession as well as to self. These data are convincing and they show that there is indeed a correlation between such cultural attitudes and the march of modernity. Shouldn't we then self-consciously make the effort to change the detrimental aspects of our cultures so that they encourage development and modernization? We must keep in mind that little brownie points scored, as for instance in the tussles of supposedly disparate interests of hills and valley, will not matter one bit if they stand against the tide of time. In the end, nothing can stand against the future, and there can be no argument that the future is headed for the modern.

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